

STIGMA STOPS HERE!

By Maricela Estrada

I was having a smoothie with a good friend from high school. Janet found me on Facebook—I had not seen her since I graduated in 1998. We decided to get together at a coffee shop to have smoothies. She works in a high school in Montebello. She used to work at our former high school as well—Montebello High. She was telling me that there a lot of kids that are hurting and have attempted suicide. She also told me that a lot of kids abuse alcohol and drugs. She told me that there is a Suicide Prevention Team on the campus site. She also told me that there was a group of teenagers that called themselves emos, known for being suicidal and cutting themselves.

Janet and I sat at the *Daily Brew* enjoying our smoothies, having a nice conversation about everything and catching up on what has happened since high school. I was telling her about my mental illness and psychosis. I told her that I'm a graduate student, striving to become a social worker so I can help others like myself. I told Janet about the psychosis I have experienced and all the embarrassing delusions, such as the time I thought the world was ending and tore off my clothes in the parking lot of a grocery store because we had to be like Adam and Eve before they discovered sin. Janet was very compassionate and listened to me as a good friend with a beautiful heart.

A short, chubby middle-aged Latino man approached us. He said, "Hello, I overheard that you are an author. I'm always looking for writers." He said he was an independent producer for Chicano films. He tried to impress me with his iPad, showing me a clip of a Native American choking a Latina woman at the river. It was horrific. He proceeded to tell me he did work at a church. "So, what is your book about?"

"My book is about a Latina and her journey through mental health recovery," I said. I told him it was entitled *Bipolar Girl: My Psychotic Self*.

He became very energetic about the issue and said "Oh, a book about locos! You know crazy! He even spun his finger by his ear. It's about somebody crazy. I can tell by the title." I kept my cool and stated, "Crazy is not a clinical term."

He hypocritically shook my hand and said, "Well, good luck." He also shook Janet's hand and we said that the man is so ignorant. My rage was about to erupt like a volcano.

Janet knew I was upset and asked if I wanted to leave. We gave each other a hug and said that we would meet up again soon. I will pray for that man; he needs a lot of prayer.

Ignorant people stigmatize us all the time. I used to work at a board and care as a Peer Bridger that offered hope to the residents living with a mental illness. We took the mentally ill residents for walks. The residents would say hello to all the neighbors. One of my dearest residents was very flamboyant with bleached hair and a sweet smile. He

always had me laughing. He said that he was going to hang out in Hollywood with all the famous girls with their Chihuahuas in their purses. One day, during one of my group walks, my dear resident told some neighbors, "Hello! I love your little dogs! They are so cute." The neighbors looked afraid. Not one neighbor said hello to our residents as we walked in a group down the street. Instead, the neighbors gave the mentally ill board and care residents dirty looks. That is why it's our job to educate people like them and advocate for our cause!

I even encountered stigma in graduate school. I was sitting attentively in my Social Welfare, History, and Introduction to Macro Practice class. The debate being discussed was if the Americans with Disabilities Act has gone too far. This girl said, "Yes, it has gone too far. People can get a note for anything." I replied, "I disagree. The Americans with Disabilities Act gives people with disabilities the opportunity to succeed and have equal opportunity for education and employment. There are some people with serious disabilities like schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and schizo-affective disorder. These people may encounter chronic symptoms such as paranoia, delusions and auditory hallucinations. They may be depressed and have suicidal ideation. If they need a note, it's not 'nothing'. They need it. It is because of the Americans with Disabilities Act that every college has Disabled Students Services. This program is funded by the Americans with Disabilities Act. It is a wonderful program that supports educational endeavors."

The social work student stated, "Ugh, well people with disabilities shouldn't be working or going to school." I was enraged. I stated, "Well, I think people who stigmatize people with disabilities shouldn't be social workers!" She was so upset. She even walked out of class when we started talking about peer advocacy. Sadly, even people with a college education can be ignorant. I will do everything in my power to prove to others that people with disabilities can be very successful in school and work. People with disabilities can be successful in accomplishing all their goals and dreams.

I have achieved one of my greatest dreams of publishing a book. My goal is to use my words and testimony to help the people who read my story. I prayed to God when I wrote my book because I felt that if I could save one person from suicide or touch one heart, just one person, then all my suffering would have been worthwhile. I would go through that pain all over again. It's my job to be an advocate for the people in recovery! I need to demonstrate to the world that ignorant people need some serious education!

My mission to build public awareness about mental illness started in the year 2002, when I started speaking publicly on mental illness in my community college. My college professors have always been very supportive. I gave speeches in all my psychology classes. The first thing students would say was, "But you look so normal. I would've never imagined that you have a mental illness." What does mental illness look like?

My mission began to grow in my community once I started working for the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health (LACDMH). It started when Blanca de Leon asked me if I could share my recovery story at the Northeast Wellness Retreat. I shared my

story in front of about 50 people, including mental health professionals, mental health consumers and dedicated volunteers. I enjoyed the retreat and celebration of “hope, wellness, and recovery.” This is LACDMH’s model. I realized it was a huge honor. When I completed my speech, everyone started clapping and asking questions; there were handshakes, hugs and pictures. There were even people that asked me for my autograph. They told me how inspirational I was. It was really awesome.

After my speech at the Northeast Wellness Retreat, I got an email from Kathleen Piché, the Public Affairs Director at LACDMH. She wanted to know if I could write my recovery story for the LACDMH e-News. I wrote the story and Kathleen loved it; she said it was a beautiful story. She published my story online, along with a picture of my book. A couple of months later, I got an email from Kathleen and she wanted to know if I would be interested in being interviewed for the LACDMH Public Information Office weekly radio show with Free Your Mind Projects. They are an organization that shares stories of inspiration and hope. I was interviewed by two wonderful people, Brian Canning and Wendy Almasy. It was such a fun experience. I was able to share my inspirational mental health recovery story and also laugh about my quest to meet Britney Spears in the psychiatric hospital. Wendy motivated me and said things like, “You go, girlie! You are an advocate!” The interview aired on a Sunday morning and my family, friends and co-workers listened to it. They were so proud of me.

Following the Free Your Mind Projects interview, I was contacted by Ashley Reitzin, program manager of the International Bipolar Foundation. She works with the founder of the International Bipolar Foundation, Muffy Walker. Ashley was a total sweetheart and asked me if I would be interested in giving a lecture in San Diego for the International Bipolar Foundation. I said yes, and also started blogging for the foundation.

My lecture for the International Bipolar Foundation was titled *My Recovery: A Story of Hope and Inspiration*. It was in front of about 40 people, including my brother and my niece Caroline, and I received a lot of positive feedback. There were a lot of questions and I had a book signing. Truly, it was a wonderful experience. My lecture was filmed and is available online.

After my lecture, I had an amazing opportunity. Kathleen Piché asked me if I would be interested in being interviewed for the LACDMH television magazine, *Meeting of the Minds*. It was such an honor. It was super fun! I posted it on Facebook and Twitter. Kathleen told me that it got a lot of views on YouTube. I e-mailed it to all my friends! You can watch it here: <http://www.youtube.com/user/lacdmhpio>. You can also follow me on Twitter @BipolarAuthor. I dedicate my personal time in sending a message of hope and survival via the internet.

My dear peers, it is through sharing our stories of courage and survival that we build massive public awareness. We need to advocate and educate the public. We need to continue to share our stories of mental health recovery to eliminate the stigma associated with mental illness. I’m on a mission to send a message of hope and survival

all over the world. I have a mental illness and you better believe I'm proud of it. I am proud to be ME, Maricela Estrada.